Testimony of Ed Wytovich, President
Eastern Pennsylvania Coalition for Abandoned Mine Reclamation (EPCAMR)

Before the

House Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit, Rural Development, and Research

December 6, 2005

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. I am pleased to be here and honored to testify on behalf of the watershed restoration efforts in Pennsylvania. This is a critical issue to all of us, and I welcome the opportunity to highlight the work we have done in our region and report to the Committee some remaining challenges.

I am an eighth grade science teacher at Upper Dauphin Area School District in Dauphin County Pennsylvania. I have been actively involved in land and water restoration projects in the Anthracite Region of Northeast Pennsylvania for over 30 years. I have worked with several conservation groups, industry representatives, elected officials, and students to help found ten watershed organizations in the Commonwealth. The work we have been able to accomplish is proof that building partnerships is essential to any winning watershed strategy, and the United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Resource Conservation Development Councils, and the Conservation Districts are a vital component of our team.

As for background for the Committee members, the Anthracite coal region lies in Northeastern Pennsylvania. The Anthracite Coal Industry declined during the 1900s, coal companies went bankrupt, and the impacts have since devastated our region. The abandoned mines leak acidic, alkaline, and metal-contaminated water, polluting water supplies, destroying fish and wildlife habitat, depressing local economies, and threatening our human health and safety. It is estimated that of Pennsylvania's 67 counties, 44 are directly affected by abandoned mines that encompass over 220,000 acres. Abandoned mine drainage (AMD) is the largest water pollution problem in the state with over 3,000 miles of stream contaminated. The Schuylkill, Susquehanna, and Lackawanna Rivers all contain enormous amounts of contamination from acid run-off and sedimentation from abandoned mine sites. The cost of cleaning up Pennsylvania's mine legacy is estimated to be as high as $15B. Currently, the state receives some money from the Abandoned Mine Reclamation Fund; however, the Fund is not structured to adequately address our issues and it will take more than one program and one agency to complete the job. Our ability to form coalitions and raise awareness has brought some success, but the largest obstacle remains federal assistance. It is my hope we can build upon our organization and work to reestablish, enlarge, and enhance USDA watershed programs.

An innovative partnership has emerged across Pennsylvania in order to address our water quality concerns. In 1996, representatives of the Conservation Districts in eastern Pennsylvania and the Pocono Northeast Resource Conservation District (RC&D) led the way for the formation of the Eastern Pennsylvania Coalition for Abandoned Mine Reclamation (EPCAMR). I am a charter member of EPCAMR and the current President. We formed the coalition to identify how districts and local cooperating organizations could promote and contribute to local, state, and federal mine reclamation efforts in the Anthracite Region. Our mission is to encourage redevelopment of mines and waters, serve as a liaison between public and private sectors, and conduct outreach and education on these important issues. Today, EPCAMR has grown to include three full time employees and is funded through an EPA 319 grant. Our membership is comprised of appointees from the Conservation Districts in the 14 county area, watershed associations, and industry representatives.

EPCAMR is supportive of reestablishing and funding the rural abandoned mine program (RAMP), which has been financed by the Abandoned Mine Fund and administered by the USDA/NRCS. RAMP is authorized for the purpose of reclaiming the soil and water resources of rural lands adversely impacted by past coal mining practices; however, the program has not been funded since 1997 and USDA has not dedicated staff to it since fiscal year 2003. This program worked through local communities (conservation districts and other agencies) to solve and address many AML problems. NRCS provided most of the technical assistance, natural resource planning, design, and construction of reclamation projects. Today, there are very few people available who have time or financial resources to fill the role NRCS has played.

In order for a project to be successful, local community support on all fronts must be in place. Local involvement has the potential to turn in to a comprehensive watershed project with the potential of attracting more financial resources. My first project involving a conservation district started in 1992 when, through the efforts of my students at Williams Valley High School, we developed a community partnership to treat an Acid Mine Drainage discharge on the Wiconisco Creek. This partnership through the help of me and my students has now become the Wiconisco Creek Restoration Association. The Wiconisco creek flows through part of the campus of Williams Valley School District and it was a natural way to have my students get involved with their local environment. The Wiconisco Creek is heavily impacted and degraded by past mining practices, especially Acid Mine Drainage, which has made many miles of the stream uninhabitable for aquatic species. This was a chance for my students to not only learn about the environment but also to become active participants in its restoration. Student projects started by monitoring the stream to learn about the water chemistry and why there weren’t any fish in the stream.

From there the students did research to find the sources of pollution and what could be done about them. Their research led to an innovative project proposal for the stream called a diversion well. My students, through community connections, formed a coalition to address the problem and with community support the well was constructed. This project has, in part, led to many partnerships for me in the restoration community. My students, as part of another project, helped me form the Wiconisco Creek restoration Association which continues to do many projects that are helping to restore the Wiconisco Creek.

In 1996 I helped form the Catawissa Creek Restoration Association and am the current president. I would like to use the Catawissa as an example of how USDA supports a watershed towards recovery.

Very little Anthracite mining actually took place in the Catawissa Watershed (which encompasses approximately 150 square miles), but it has been greatly impacted by the construction of five [5] mine drainage tunnels that were dug during the heyday of Anthracite mining. These tunnels were dug to drain by gravity the coal fields in the headwaters of the Catawissa. Although underground mining in this area ceased many years ago, these tunnels still discharge millions of gallons of acid mine drainage daily into the Catawissa Creek and its tributaries, rendering it virtually lifeless throughout most of its 42 mile length.

The first project undertaken in the Catawissa Watershed was treatment of the Oneida #1 discharge located in Eagle Rock, a gated community located near Hazleton, Pa. This discharge is the primary source of water to Lake Choctaw and contaminates the Tomhicken Creek, a tributary to Catawissa Creek and the Susquehanna River. Through joint efforts of the Columbia and Schuylkill Conservation Districts and EPCAMR, a project to treat the discharge was proposed and we received a conservation technical assistance grant. NRCS was in charge of the design and some funding [$60,000] for construction was provided by the Rural Abandoned Mine Program (RAMP). The project cost approximately $350,000 and was completed in 2001. Oneida #1 treats an estimated 1,500 gallons per minute of acid mine drainage and the immediate effects of the system include a change of pH in Lake Choctaw from 5 to 7 and a corresponding increase in pH of 15 miles of the Tomhicken Creek.

With the help of NRCS engineers, we devised a plan in which manure storage tanks could be used for future projects that would enable us to reduce the footprint of the projects. We calculated what would be necessary to treat the Audenreid Mine Tunnel Discharge; the largest abandoned mine drainage discharge in the watershed and located near the headwaters of the Catawissa Creek.

After review of my conceptual ideas and calculations by United States Geological Survey, Hedin Environmental, and engineers from the PA Bureau of Abandoned Mine Reclamation, it was decided that this was a viable idea. In a cooperative venture between PA Conservation Districts and NRCS a conceptual design was put forth. The Schuylkill Conservation District, in partnership with the Catawissa Creek Restoration Association, applied for a grant through the PA Growing Greener Program to design and build a treatment system for the Audenreid discharge. Governor Rendell awarded a Growing Greener grant for the project and some monies were provided by an EPA 319 grant. This is perhaps the largest passive treatment system, in terms of amount of water to be treated, ever built. The system is scheduled to come on line Friday, December 2, 2005.

When completed, the Audenreid Discharge Treatment System will effectively restore water quality for 36 miles of now impaired stream and make it into what we believe will be a world class trout stream. The PA Fish and Boat Commission estimated that this project will have a benefit/cost ratio of 2 to, due to increased recreational fishing opportunities. This does not take into consideration the added benefits of increased property values along the stream corridor, opportunities for other recreational pursuits such as birding, camping, and guide services. With this in mind I have written a proposal to help increase access for the public to the stream corridor which, I feel, will lead to increased opportunities for landowners to benefit financially from our project.

Other benefits, though harder to quantify, include not only quality of life issues for the residents of the Catawissa Watershed but also an increase in diversity of species that require clean water. The members of the Catawissa Creek Restoration Association who have been a part of this restoration since the beginning feel a greater sense of stewardship towards their watershed. Through participation in reclamation efforts we develop ownership and from that ownership we develop stewardship. This could not have happened if it were not for the partnerships that have developed and nurtured by the conservation districts, EPCAMR, CCRA, NRCS, the Pocono Northeast RC&D, Pa. Department of Environmental Protection, the EPA, landowners and many others who have come together to restore the Catawissa Creek Watershed.

Pennsylvania's watershed groups can point to several successes, but there is much work left to be done. We believe our efforts to bring all parties to the table may be stifled due to the elimination of important programs such as RAMP and lack of federal funding for RC&D's and staff. It is my hope I've shed light on a small , but equally important program and that we can continue to work together to address our watershed concerns.